The Danish Way: Abortion in the Public Discourse

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ESSAY OUT OF ISSUE

On June 1, 2025, Denmark extended its abortion legislation: women[1] from the age of 15 (previously 18) can now terminate a pregnancy until week 18 of gestation (previously week 12) without requiring consultation and approval.[2] In doing so, Denmark positioned itself on the liberal end of a broad spectrum of views on abortion. As in Sweden, women can now choose to have an abortion until week 18 of gestation without requiring consultation and approval.

By contrast, in my home country Germany, for example, elective abortion remains subject to restrictive legislation. A renewed attempt to change the controversial Section 218 of the German Criminal Code was rejected in February 2025 by the legal committee of the Bundestag. Section 218 stipulates that "abortion is a punishable offence for all concerned (pregnant woman, physician, instigator, assistant)" unless specific conditions apply, such as mandatory counselling, medical grounds or grounds related to a crime (Bundesministerium). Abortion in Germany thus continues to be criminalized, but is typically not penalized.

A few days before the change of legislation in Denmark, I was struck by a Facebook post in which Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen commented on the change of law in Denmark. I was equally surprised to read the responses her post received. In this post, Frederiksen celebrated the new legislation with evocative, almost radical language: She spoke of a step forward (while other countries move backwards); she highlighted her pride, the fight that had led to victory and Denmark's uncompromising stance on women's rights.[3] I recognized in her words a familiar notion of Danish national pride, a sense that Denmark enjoys the role of the trailblazer. I did not recognize what I had also come to know about Danish culture, namely its willingness to compromise and seek a consensus. What also made me curious was the simplistic, nuance-free language of battle and victory on a highly complex issue that I knew had been controversially discussed in Denmark in recent years when the voices around a potential expansion of the legislation grew louder.

The strong emotions that her post raised on Facebook seemed to confirm my sense that something about this post was odd. Roughly 25% of the reactions to Frederiksen's post represented an "angry face" or "sad face" (that is, 3.300 out of ca. 13.400).[4] More than 6.000 written messages comment on a variety of issues, and those that object to Frederiksen's praise consider, among others, the new law as a step back, they bring up the fetus' rights and describe the new law as cruel and inhumane. I am aware that such comments should not be overrated and that social media and digital spaces more generally tend to incite outrage and hatred. Still, a survey in May 2025 (Ritzau) shows that only 51% percent of Danish people supported the expansion of the existing abortion rights from 12 to 18 weeks while 31% were against it.[5] The approval was equally tight among the members of the Danish Ethics Council: 9 out of 17 members voted in favor of an expansion to 18 weeks; 5 felt more comfortable with 15 weeks; 4 wanted to keep the 12 weeks (Heissel, 2023). Frederiksen was thus celebrating with a rather narrow majority of Danes.

As an international Medical Humanities researcher working on cultural meaning-making in the context of health care, something did not add up, and I was curious to speak with Danes who have a deeper insight into the Danish abortion discourse. I reached out to five interviewees who have publicly spoken about abortion in Denmark before to ask them: What do you make of the incongruities I had stumbled upon? Are those even contradictions? The interviewees consist of a researcher, two political activists, an artist and an employee in the civil society sector. They had recommended each other as discussants who could help me find answers to my questions.

SIMPLE BINARIES?

First, some more facts though. Danish people's views on abortion are nuanced. According to Det Etiske Råd (the Danish Ethics Council), most Danes believe that fetuses are entitled to some degree of protection. This right to protection is considered less problematic at an early stage of pregnancy and more important at a

later stage. Overall, Danes thus have a "gradualistisk opfattelse" – a gradualist view – regarding the moral and ethical aspects of abortion (Det Etiske Råd, 2016), which research confirms (e.g. Uldall, 2015). Evidently, this nuance was missing in Frederiksen's victory language.

Before I continue, I want to clarify that other Danish leaders have used this type of language as well.[6] When I primarily reference Frederiksen and her language use in the following pages, I do so because hers was the first example I encountered. I also want to disclose that I have a long-standing research interest in victory and fight language and have previously authored a book about the battle metaphor in relation to illness experiences (2022). In health care research, the battle or war metaphor is ubiquitous but also controversial. On the one hand, the notion of battle is considered stigmatizing, reductive and prescriptive because it demands a militaristic stance towards illness in which winning is the only option while losing or capitulating are seen as shameful. On the other hand, the continued use of this metaphor suggests that it expresses something that feels true and may even be empowering to people living with illness. To me, Frederiksen's victory language not only suggests that the wrestling for an ethically sound solution was like a fight or battle, it also, and more problematically so, divides people and political arguments into winners and losers.

While I saw a problem, one interviewee from the civil society sector[7] offered a different view. He brought up the historical context of the difficulties that women's rights advocates have faced, and he emphasized that the rising number of people who eventually came to agree with the possibility of a more permissive legislation (see fn 5) has been the result of hard work and steadfast dedication to the cause. Therefore, it was through debates and continued negotiations that resulted in the law being passed in Folketinget with 74 votes (and 29 voting 'no') (Folketinget, 2025). Speaking of a victory, he implied, signifies that the hard work paid off.

Rightly so, he also pointed out that this victory language is not unique to the abortion debate but rather a "spill-over" from how politicians commonly talk in the media.

He added that, from an advocate and civil society perspective, "the 'victory' framing isn't necessarily helpful. Doing public victory laps might inadvertently alienate some stakeholders, while potentially also weakening the credibility of a future critique of the adopted legislation."

An event at Arbejdermuseet, organized along with Sex & Samfund on the occasion of the new abortion law, illustrates how a more inclusive, future-oriented framework can look like (Arbejdermuseet, 2025). The event was called a "markering" – an occasion to signal or create visibility – and featured a program that recognized the significance of the legislative change but also a continued focus on remaining issues.[8] In short, a sense of victory need not exclude a critical distance to that victory.

Still, victory metaphors generate powerful emotions, not only on social media. In my conversation with Laura Kreutzfeldt Kristensen, the editor of the anthology *Abortfortællinger: 50 historier om den frie abort* (2023), she described a sense of annoyance. To her, the language constructs Denmark as a role model for other countries, which is problematic

> "because this is the first time that any changes have happened in 50 years. They still don't talk about how they want to secure the care around this system after changing the law. There is still a money problem. There is still a problem with resources, and healthcare professionals still need better pay. So, by speaking of a victory, they don't talk about those remaining issues and pretend as if there is no problem […] I get frustrated about that way of communicating because it feels like showing off."

Kerstin Hoffmann, a physician and communications secretary at *Retten til Liv*, for whom any abortion is morally wrong, also pointed to ongoing issues in the care of pregnant women, which the new law does not

address.

> "The whole rejoicing from the government and the celebration […] was very saddening for me because I think that on the principal level there's not that much of a difference between the fetus in the 12th week and in the 18th week. It's the same valuable person in my opinion. But I sense a cynicism in having an abortion of such a big fetus. You have a small person in your hand. I am a medical doctor myself and have seen miscarriages. It's so sad to celebrate that as a victory and to celebrate Denmark as somebody going forward. Why do we have to push the limit?"

Frustration is the predominant feeling that disability rights activist Sarah Glerup described when she explained to me that this type of language sends off the wrong message. Celebrating "fri abort" suggests that

> "we're all basically islands that can just do whatever we want, that we're not connected to other people or a specific context or a specific discourse. People overlook the fact that if you're pregnant and you are in a specific set of circumstances – those might be social circumstances or you're expecting a child with a disability –, then your choice is probably not going to be free. It's going to be based on a lot of other factors. […] I know a lot of doctors who are quite shocked if someone doesn't want a screening for Down syndrome or if a woman decides to not have an abortion when they find out."

The catchy victory language thus conceals the broader social, economic, moral and individual dimensions that abortion implies, generating affective binaries of national pride and celebration on the one hand, and frustration, anger and sadness on the other.

And there is more at stake. The people I have mentioned so far are policy professionals or public figures in the media with strong, fully formed opinions, whether as politicians, activists or political advisors. By contrast, a person in doubt, someone who feels betwixt and between on the issue of abortion, may feel intimidated and discouraged to speak up. She may even lack the words to express what she feels. There is a reason, after all, why the fight and battle metaphors for illness are so controversially discussed in health care research: While some cancer survivors do feel like winners, others do not because their survival came at a great cost and the lives they knew have been fundamentally upended (e.g. Thorsen, 2018). The latter will find it doubly difficult to speak: not only is the victory language inaccurate or only partially true, but its binary implications also make those who do not win into losers, the defeated.[9]

Experiences of intimidation resulting from uncertainty are also described by the women in *Abortfortællinger* (Kristensen, 2023). Choosing an abortion – which most insist was the right decision – shook their foundations, made them distrust their own bodies and the health care system and burdened them with a sense of shame, loss and grief (also see Wohlmann, 2026). Many struggled not only with a lack of words but also a lack of adequate narratives to represent their conflicting feelings. As Kristensen argues, there are only two types of stories about abortion in Danish culture: either the experience of an abortion is tough, or it is easy (Franceschi, 2021). There is nothing in between.

A final point about the battle and victory language: In her Facebook post, Mette Frederiksen situated Denmark within an international context where other countries move backwards. In the US, the discourse around abortion has been repeatedly framed as an "abortion war" (Solinger, 1998; Saletan, 2003). In addition, a "gender war" is allegedly being fought between radical feminists and Men's Rights activists. In the US, it seems that such polarizing language has become normalized, and its use comes at a cost. In the context of Denmark, it can imply that anyone who questions the Danish progress and victory narrative may risk being cast as an "enemy" of reproductive autonomy and women's rights more generally. Such a presumed "guilt" by association is energized, I believe, by language that operates with allegedly clear

binaries.

The binaries in the abortion discourse thus occur on the level of language, affect and narrative; and this threefold occurrence may explain why it can be difficult to speak about abortion in a nuanced way. It may also explain why there is still a taboo around abortion in Denmark. In a press release about the new legislation, Majbrit Berlau, the general secretary at *Sex & Samfund,* called out the silence that still exists around the topic of abortion; she also points to the importance of striving towards an important goal: "at sætte samtalen fri", that is, to free the conversation around abortion (Sex & Samfund, 2024).

But why is abortion a taboo in a country that has endorsed "fri abort" for more than 50 years? What is the nature of this taboo?

DANES DON'T TALK ABOUT ABORTION – OR DO THEY?

Taboos signal that something is avoided, maybe even repressed, forbidden and possibly stigmatized. In a 2018 opinion piece in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, historian Lau Sander Esbensen offers an explanation. He suggests that the dominant narrative of Danish abortion legislation has been that of "the story of success.". Any alternative account has been considered a direct or indirect attack on women's freedom, equality and independence. This gender-political argument (or "diktat"), so Esbensen, prematurely equates critical voices with a threat to "fri abort." With such a rigid assessment, nuance, ambivalence and ambiguity risk being marginalized or narrowed down to a (gender-) political issue.

This reasoning, if true, seems only a partial explanation of the Danish taboo. As I found out, abortion also uncomfortably jars with a Danish sense of propriety and decency. Several of my interviewees pointed to the importance of privacy in Danish culture and a Danish reluctance to talk about religion, salaries, health or sex in public. Abortion is no different in that respect. While such notions of propriety exist in other cultures as well, the Danish concept of 'hygge' is culturally specific. In Denmark, "at hygge sig," that is to feel comfortable, relaxed and cozy in the company of others, is considered a cultural value. It is even a source of national pride. A focus on 'hygge' suggests that the taboo around abortion is motivated by consideration and thoughtfulness: the aim is not to repress a difficult topic, but to create a safe space and protect the other.[10] And indeed, as Kerstin Hoffmann suggests, talking about abortion for real, that is without being vague or superficial, may entail uncomfortable, at times moral, questions that can quickly become personal, touch on individual beliefs and worldviews and may even hurt someone. However, my colleague Anette Søgaard Nielsen, a professor at SDU's health faculty and an expert on stigma, found this interpretation of 'hygge' culture too polite and suggested a different reading: What if Danish 'coziness' masks a tendency towards shyness and bashfulness? What if it is an excuse for conflict avoidance and evasiveness? What if these less noble features are simply *interpreted as* tolerance and open-mindedness? Most likely, the meaning of Danish 'hygge' is all of the above, and the reasons for why many Danes may avoid difficult topics – and whether this occurs consciously or unconsciously – are also context dependent and person specific.[11] The effect seems the same: silence around the individual experiences of abortion.

Gender stereotypes and cultural biases, despite Denmark's long history of feminist movements and focus on women's equality, may further contribute to that silence. The testimonies in *Abortfortællinger* (Kristensen, 2023) repeatedly address explicit and implicit assumptions about a woman's alleged promiscuity, irresponsibility and immaturity as the cause of her unplanned pregnancy. The female writers describe feelings of shame which are either internalized or triggered by their encounter with biased partners, parents, friends and health care professionals. In a vulnerable situation, the mere expectation of such stereotypes (or having to confront them or fend them off) can be disheartening and result in self-censorship. What is needed instead, as many of

the women in *Abortfortællinger* suggest, are attentive, non-judgmental listeners. People who can be witnesses to another person's doubts, potential crisis and suffering. None of this is easy or should be taken for granted.

What *is* taken for granted, by contrast, is that abortion is a non-issue in Denmark. This "selvfølge" (Kristensen, 2023, p. 92, 109) or normalization of abortion complicates any attempt to address the taboo around abortion, and maybe counter-intuitively so: Abortion may be a taboo in Denmark not *despite* but exactly *because* it is such a normal, natural part of the Danish self-image. To put it simply: What is there to talk about if it is the natural, reasonable (*fornuftige*) thing to do? (also see Kristensen, 2023, p. 93). As the interviewee from the civil society sector put it, the general tenor is: There *is* no issue with abortion in Denmark! Therefore, "Don't bother me with this!" The new law might even exacerbate the situation and lead to the common notion that the battle is over now that the new law is in place. As a result, the already existing attitude of "You do you! Go get your abortion. I don't really want to hear about it" might continue to downplay the need to have a serious conversation, he maintains.

Annie Ernaux, the French autobiographer, observes a similar paradox in *L'événement* (*Happening,* 2000), in which she describes her illegal abortion in the 1960s, about a decade before abortion was decriminalized in France in 1975. She argues that a new law that redresses the injustices of a prior regulation often silences its previous victims because it suggests that there is no longer anything to talk about. And yet, the abortion itself (and the complex experiences it generated) remained unforgettable for Ernaux and demanded to be narrated. Ernaux insists that she could do this only after the law had changed, as it afforded the discursive nuances she needed to adequately convey what had happened. By contrast, in the 1960s, a simplistic language and radical formulas determined what was sayable. In the midst of the political struggle over abortion, this type of rigid discourse thus helped shape "collective meanings" around abortion which, at the time, took priority. It seems as if there is never a good time to speak about abortion in nuanced ways.

There is one last and related point that emerged from my conversations, and it ties the legalization and normalization of abortion to a sense of national unity. The long and stable compromise on abortion in Denmark (Holm, 2023) has created a unified image: One country, one opinion. Following Turid Nolsøe, who wrote her PhD on the biopolitical media discourses on abortion between Denmark and the Faroe Islands (2023), this image of unity is important in Denmark for policy reasons. In our conversation she explained that it enables Denmark to position itself with an (alleged) unified front against other countries, such as the Faroe Islands, where abortion was illegal until December 2025..[12] The unified image allows Danes and Danish politicians to present their country as "evolved, modern, liberal, kind," Sarah Glerup adds. And, understandably, it enables the Danish prime minister to capitalize on the Danish self-image as a role model, a progressive, forward-moving nation and a source of pride. Abortion as a "selvfølge" amplifies this self-image: Abortion in Denmark is not only legal, it is *also* a non-issue.

Whether this view is accurate or not, it is the stuff that legends, myths and national visions are made of. And as we know from other countries, shiny images typically do not not match what is happening on the inside.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My conversations have helped me clarify the many nuances in the Danish discourse on abortion. While it was my interest in contradictions and incongruencies that inspired these conversations, I have come to see them as a reasonable result of the fact that, on the topic of abortion, a whole range of meanings collide – biomedical, legal, ethical, spiritual, linguistic, cultural, political and subjective. To put it differently, cultural discourses on abortion are often contradictory exactly *because* the subject matter is so complex.

As with many other boundary experiences of human life, answers to some fundamental questions about abortion are still unknown, such as when does life begin? In the field of Medical Humanities, such a lack – of clear answers and irrefutable evidence – is considered a catalyst for extensive meaning-making practices by patients and carers, who draw on cultural resources like metaphors as well as cultural narratives and stereotypes to explain where symptoms and illnesses come from, what they mean and how they impact identities and social lives.[13] As a result, much of the teaching in Medical Humanities aims to convey that "the truth about any human experience is . . . that 'there is no single way it can be told'" and that, for this reason, a tolerance for ambiguity and paradox is vital (Hunsaker Hawkins & McEntyre, 2000, p. 14). Obviously, a pregnancy may have multiple, even contradictory semantic layers for a woman and her social environment. And for this reason, the Danish Etiske Råd recommends in its publication *Etik og sprogbrug – fra vugge til grav* to pay particular attention to the words used when speaking about pregnancy (Det Etiske Råd, 2012).[14]

I started these reflections with a focus on metaphors and binary oppositions that, to me, bear signs of an overly simplistic and maybe even radical style that seems inadequate in the Danish context on abortion. It is not my intention, however, to decry the use of this type of language and the narratives it invites. In my view, it is important to identify these forms of expression and be attentive to the issues they may entail. What seems equally important is a focus on the contradictions and ambiguities that this attention brings to the surface. In this sense, both the language and the contradictions are a seismograph, not necessarily for a bigger issue or, worse, a foreshadowing of impending doom or the crisis of a democratic, pluralistic discourse in an increasingly polarized world, but for something that is important, that requires careful parsing and curious inquiry.

This is not to trivialize problematic language and simplistic narratives. By contrast, a view across the Atlantic, where abortion has become one of the most polarizing and divisive issues even though most US Americans hold moderate views, is a reminder of what is at stake for women's rights and democratic societies more generally (see Wohlmann, 2025). Poland, too, seems to be hotly divided on the topic of abortion, among many other issues. At the same time, the use of problematic language and simplistic narratives should not be overrated. My research on the battle metaphor for illness experiences shows that even restrictive language and simplistic narratives can be used in varied, unpredictable and surprising ways (Wohlmann, 2022).

For all of these reasons, it is important to both look *at* these problematic forms of expression – to identify and to problematize – and then to look *beyond* or *through* them in an attempt to find out what *else* is expressed and what *more* can be found. The benefits (and necessity) of this second move are illustrated in a metaphor by German writer Jagoda Marinić in *Sanfte Radikalität* (2024; *Tender Radicality;* my translation): she suggests that the willingness to also look beyond or through problematic word choices prevents us from hardening, from becoming radical in response to radicality. The metaphor of hardness does not sit well with me as a researcher in the allegedly soft humanities. Still, beyond the metaphor, Marinić has a point.

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[1] When I use the term "woman" in relation to pregnancy, it includes pregnant people who do not identify as women.

[2] By comparison: In the Nordic countries, only Iceland has a more permissive regulation (22 weeks). In Europe, the UK and Netherlands allow abortions up until 24 weeks (Jónasdóttir 2023/2024).

[3] The original Facebook post by Mette Frederiksen (April 24, 2025): "Mens andre lande tager et skridt tilbage – tager vi i dag et vigtigt skridt frem. Vi udvider kvinders ret til abort. For unge piger. Og for alle, når det gælder antal uger. Retten til selv at bestemme over sin egen krop – over sit liv og sin fremtid – det er en af de mest fundamentale rettigheder, der findes. Mit hjerte græder for de piger og kvinder, der har mistet den ret flere steder i verden. Hvor stærke kræfter ønsker at undertrykke og bestemme over kvindens krop. I dag sender vi et stærkt signal: Vi vil kæmpe for de sejre, vi har opnået. Og vi går ikke på kompromis. Tværtimod. Jeg er stolt af, at vi i Danmark viser en anden vej. At vi udvider kvinders abortrettigheder i stedet for at undergrave dem. Tak til alle jer, der har kæmpet for det – førhen og i dag "

[4] Last accessed on August 8, 2025.

[5] The approval rose from 13% in August 2022 to 47.6% in December 2023 (Sex & Samfund, 2023).

[6] For example, the General Secretary of Sex & Samfund Majbrit Berlau (Sex & Samfund, 2024) used the victory language, as well. Both Health Minister Sophie Løhde and Magnus Heunicke, minister for gender equality spoke of a "historisk dag" (a historical day), called for celebration and employed almost the same wording (a step forward, national pride) as Frederiksen (Sundhedspolitik 2025; Heunicke 2025).

[7] This interviewee wished to stay anonymous.

[8] The panel debate "Ny abortlov – fik vi løst alle problemerne?" ("The new abortion law – have we solved all the problems?") showcases a willingness to (self-)critically assess what has been won.

[9] Such an opposition of winners and losers raises more questions, as my colleague Ida Aaskov Dolmer reminds me: Frederiksen and others implicitly suggest that all Danes are winners because of the new legislation. Within the binary structure that their language suggests, where does this place people who are uncertain? Are they automatically "the opposition"? And in opposition to what? Abortion? The expanded law? Women's rights? Denmark as a role-model?

[10] In my Danish language school, for example, our teacher explained to us that among the possible exam topics for the final "studieprøve," abortion would certainly not be a topic. It's too personal. Given that exam situations can be very stressful, I got the sense that the avoidance of difficult topics is motivated by a consideration for the examinees.

[11] By discussing 'hygge,' I am just scratching the surface. The Danish consensus culture and the cultural uniformity and homogeneity that are often traced to the Danish Jante law offer additional layers of complexity to the Danish abortion discourse. For a nuanced discussion of Jante law, see for example Stigsgaard 2005, Madsen 2008.

[12] This positioning, as Nolsøe analyzes in her PhD thesis (2023), is interlaced with geo- and biopolitical discourses that draw on the colonial relationship between the Faroe Islands and Denmark, even though the Faroe Islands' status as a former colony is contested.

[13] There is ample research that traces such cultural meaning-making processes for diseases like the plague, tuberculosis, depression, HIV/AIDS and more recently endometriosis. Susan Sontag is one of many cultural critics, patients and researchers who have condemned these practices for being ultimately harmful. And yet, meaning-making in times of crises is as human as it gets.

[14] For example, expressions like a future child, a fetus, a fetal system, a fertilized egg, an embryo or amniotic tissue, each carry personal values and convey specific meanings and consequences, such as who needs protection and support (Det Etiske Råd, 2012, p. 15).

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